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ABSTRACT

Schools in the United States are the target of widespread criticism, and many of the ills of society are blamed on the inadequacy of the schools without regard to the problems that beset them. Schools have been beleaguered by a flood of social problems. Social critics ask the schools to take the lead in combatting social problems, often at a cost to educational quality. An objective look at the performance of American schools was taken by the authors of the Sandia Report, a report on the status of public schools that was commissioned by the Secretary of Energy. These researchers found steady or slightly improving trends on a number of indicators and suggested that the decline in scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is due to the changing population of test takers, that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) does not document real decline, and that the schools are not so far behind in terms of workforce preparation. The impact of factors outside the control of the schools and such influences as increased immigration and poverty cannot be disregarded in considering the true state of the schools. Regardless of their shortcomings and achievements at present, schools will not be able to meet the challenges of the future without broader support from society at large. One graph documents SAT trends. (SLD)

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Why Blame Schools?

Mary McClellan

When the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered its report in 1983, the alarming rhetoric within its pages set in motion an era of school bashing. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," they warned in *A Nation at Risk*, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." The Commission's report—and subsequent reports the same year—attracted public attention to education and ignited a multitude of reform initiatives that continue today. Assessing those efforts a decade later, corporate leaders are "deeply disturbed by the lack of broad-based measurable results."[1] David Kearns, chairman of the New American Schools Development Corporation and former U.S. deputy education secretary, recently complained, "We put a man on the moon in 10 years. But in terms of what our children know, have we progressed since the early 1980s? The answer is no. Since the early 1970s? The answer is no."[2]

Amid such fears, schools continue to be the target of widespread criticism: They are responsible for the nation's decline in the global industrial marketplace, and their graduates will not be able to contend in a technological age. These views are reinforced by widely disseminated evidence that American students' test scores are declining and inferior to those of students in other industrialized countries. As a retired IBM executive observes, "Unfortunately, the vast majority of the schools are about the same as they were 10 years ago. The return on investment in education is minimal when one applies real quality control measurements to the public school system."[3]

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Inside the School

Whether most have made significant changes in the last decade or not, one thing is certain: Schools have been beleaguered by a flood of social problems plaguing children and young people, from teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and juvenile crime to adolescent suicide and a growing AIDS epidemic. In 1991, the most recent year for which data are available, Fordham University's Index of Social Health reached its lowest point since it was first compiled in 1970.[4] The number of children living in poverty has grown steadily to over 20%, more than double that of other major industrialized nations.[5] Especially hard hit are 44% of African-American children and 38% of Hispanic children.[6] By eighth grade, 7 out of 10 children have consumed alcohol.[7] In 1990, 9% of all babies born in the U.S.—360,645 children—had teenage mothers[8]; 22,000 infants were abandoned in U.S. hospitals the next year.[9] Perhaps most distressing is the amount of violence pervading many children's lives. Nearly 4,000 children are murdered each year[10]; among 10- to 17-year-olds the arrest rate for murder more than doubled from 5.4 youths per 100,000 in 1983 to 12.7 in 1991.[11]

Experts warn that such disturbing problems threaten not only the health but the survival of one of America's most valuable resources. Social critics are urging the schools to assume leadership roles in the battle against these threats. In fact, some experts argue that, for the moment, these problems take precedence over more traditional learning objectives. Once they taught basic skills, but now schools struggle to meet children's basic needs. As a New York City public school principal sees it, "We truly are the great social service system. We have to do for children the things that their families can't do."[12] According to another observer, a growing share of the school budget is

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Once they taught basic skills, but now schools struggle to meet children's basic needs.

devoted to counseling and psychological services; the curriculum is increasingly therapeutic as schools have become the "emergency rooms of the emotions, devoted not only to developing minds but also to repairing hearts."[13]

Policy makers, eyeing the captive audience inside the schoolhouse, seek to remedy complex social problems within the confines of its walls. As the U.S. Surgeon General observes, "The best place we've got is schools."[14] New Jersey, Iowa, and Kentucky have mandated school service centers, while other schools around the country voluntarily offer such social services as parenting classes, family counseling, and medical clinics on site in an effort to "get parents to give us a more healthy, well-prepared child."[15] Most states have legislated sex and substance abuse education as add-ons to the curriculum. But all too often, mandated solutions are not accompanied by adequate increases in funding. Federal and state budgets sink deeper into red ink, yet public expectations about what schools should (and can) do increase by the minute.

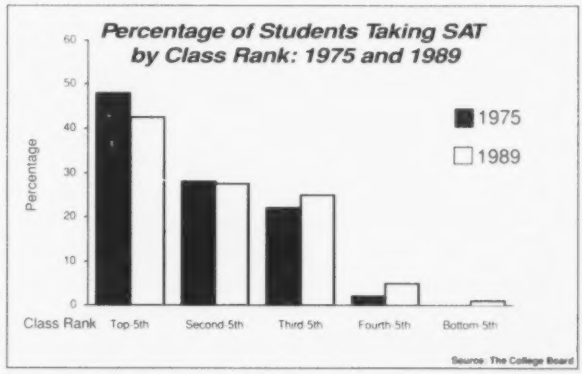
Disregarding the current social milieu, many critics continue to equate poor school performance with poor education quality, which they single out as the root cause of any number of the nation's ills. School bashing, it seems, gets votes, sells news, and diverts workforce training costs from the private sector. But frequently these critics rely on misinterpretations and misrepresentations of research data to support their claims. Objective interpretations that reflect positively on education are often ignored by the media or even suppressed by the federal government, as in the case of the Sandia report.[16]

The Sandia Report

In 1990 the Secretary of Energy enlisted three senior researchers at the Sandia National Laboratories to report on the status of elementary and secondary public education. Using existing data from federal and national agencies, Charles Carson, Robert Huelskamp, and Thomas Woodall investigated popular measures being used to discuss the status of education, for example, dropout statistics, standardized test scores, postsecondary education, educational funding, international comparisons, and future workforce requirements. Where possible, they examined data over time. Summarizing their findings, they noted, "To our surprise, on nearly every measure, we found steady or slightly improving trends."[17] Although it contained good news about education in the U.S., the report was not released to the public until 1993. Some of the common measures of public school performance the Sandia report examined are discussed below.

The SAT. The Sandia researchers questioned the use of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a test designed to assess an individual's probable success in college, as a yardstick of public school performance. Among the popular misconceptions they addressed is the belief that SAT scores began declining in the mid-1960s and bottomed out in the late 1970s. Since then, it seems that students have made only modest gains. Graphs illustrating this trend help paint a dismal picture of the condition of U.S. education.

The three researchers attributed the decline to a change in the test-taking pool, however, not to a deterioration in the country's education system. What this means is that proportionately fewer test takers are in the top 20% of their class than 15 years ago, while proportionately more are in the lower 60% of their class. The bar graph below illustrates this shift. Students in the second 20% comprised about the same proportion of test takers in 1989 as in 1975, while students in the remaining 60% made up a much larger proportion in 1989 than in the past.



As a result of this shift, the median class rank of test takers dropped from the 79th percentile in 1971 to the 73rd percentil in 1989. "The drop from 79th to 73rd percentile for the median test takers is not trivial," the authors noted. "The median being the 79th percentile would be achieved if the entire top 42% of a

class took the exam. To lower the median rank to the 73rd percentile, the portion of the class between the 58th and 46th percentiles would have to be added to the group taking the test. It would be surprising if this change did not lower average test results."[18]

Of course, the Sandia Report was not the first to attempt to rectify such misinterpretations of SAT scores. More than 10 years ago, for example, researchers cautioned in the *Harvard Educational Review*, "The overall message conveyed by . . . *A Nation at Risk* . . . is that education has become one of this nation's major social problems. . . . This pessimistic impression results partly from the widely disseminated accounts of a virtually steady national decline in standardized test performance since the 1960s. . . . The strategy of assessing educational outcomes at the national level has perhaps been misplaced."[19]

But in spite of similar warnings over the years, SAT scores continue to be misinterpreted and reported by the media. In 1993, for example, columnist George Will misused the scores in arguing that there is no relationship between school funding and education quality (a claim Ronald Reagan made during his early years in the White House to justify proposed reductions in federal spending for education).[20]

Even though the test-taking pool has expanded to include more students from the middle ranks (good news in itself), mean SAT scores have actually remained relatively stable in recent years.[21] The number of students scoring at or above the 600 level on the verbal and math sections of the SAT has returned to the period prior to the declines of the 1970s; the upper one-fifth of high school graduates competes favorably with its international counterpart, and the next two-fifths could, with some remediation, complete college.[22] Recently, Education Secretary Richard Riley announced that SAT scores rose in 1993 for the second year in a row.

The NAEP. Another popular measure the Sandia researchers examined is the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP. Established by Congress in 1969 to monitor trends in national student achievement, NAEP scores have been used to make state-by-state comparisons since 1988, although not all states participate in the testing program. Commonly referred to as "the nation's report card," the public has followed the posting of NAEP test scores much the way investors follow the stock market. Reviewing test scores over a 15-year period, the Sandia researchers found "that performance has been steady or improving in nearly all subject areas tested, and that greatest gains have been made in basic skills."[23] Since the Sandia researchers concluded their study, the U.S. Education Department announced that eighth-graders' NAEP math scores increased in 18 of 37 states between 1990 and 1992.

Over the 24 years it has existed, the NAEP has been the target of criticism on more than one occasion. Most recently, reports by the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Academy of Education, and the General Accounting Office (GAO) have faulted NAEP achievement levels—basic, proficient, and advanced—as unsuitable for reporting test results. NAEP's advanced level in math was found to exceed world-class standards, according to a 1992 GAO interim report,[24] and in 1993 an outside review panel found a mismatch between the achievement levels and corresponding test questions.[25] Another study commissioned by NAEP's governing board in 1993 found that few educators were familiar with the test, and most of those interviewed found NAEP reports too long and complex for practical use. It has been suggested that a more useful application of the test would be to release scores to individual districts for evaluative purposes, although federal law prohibits reporting scores below the state level.

Workforce Skills. Taking exception to the widespread conviction that schools are failing to prepare students for the twenty-first-century workforce, the Sandia researchers asserted that students currently enrolled in public schools will account for only 22% of the future workforce (at least 70% was already employed in 1990, and 7% will immigrate to this country). "[I]t is the adult population that must be trained," they concluded. "Education reform must be focused on skills improvements more than a decade in advance, and predicting skills requirements that far ahead is problematic."[26] To illustrate this point, the researchers reviewed two assessments of the educational requirements for U.S. jobs: the Hudson Institute's *Workforce 2000* and *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* from the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). The Hudson report concluded that the American educational system matches the needs of the workplace: The NCEE found that not only is the system overeducating many for

"It is the adult population that must be trained."

work they will eventually perform, but one-third of all jobs require less than a high school diploma.

The Sandia researchers also examined one national and two state surveys of workforce skill requirements. Business leaders surveyed in Michigan and New York identified only two academic skills necessary for the workplace—reading and following directions. Listed among the highly important "skills" were freedom from substance abuse, honesty, respect, and punctuality. Lowest were understanding foreign languages, math, natural science, computers, and social sciences. Only 15% of U.S. employers surveyed by the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce reported difficulty filling skilled positions, and these tended to be among the chronically underpaid ones such as secretaries and clerks. The Commission attributed the shortfall to the fact that many who in the past would have filled these positions now elect to attend college in search of higher paying jobs.

Even the assumption that a college education reaps greater financial reward is being challenged by new studies, however. For example, a 1993 Census Bureau study found that the proportion of young college graduates entering lower-paying technical, sales, and administrative and clerical positions rose from 33.4% in 1989 to 38.2% in 1991, and average earnings for men in this group declined significantly during this period, although earnings for women did not.[27]

International Comparisons. Although the Sandia researchers addressed common measures used to make international comparisons, they cautioned that, by necessity, such comparisons are simplistic in that they measure student achievement at one age or in one subject area. Another problem is that effects due to variations in how schools are organized, what subjects are taught and when, and how and when students are assessed are not taken into account. As demographer Harold Hodgkinson notes, many American students in the lowest 40% would be on the streets in other countries.[28] Here, they remain in school until they are 18, and their failure to thrive is reflected in standardized test scores.

While the Sandia researchers found little credible data for making international comparisons, those from the 1988 International Assessment of Educational Progress were most complete. Those scores indicate that average U.S. student performance has been low in both math and science over the past several decades compared with other participating countries. However, as the researchers pointed out, the U.S. continues to lead the world in the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds receiving bachelor's degrees and also in the percentage of women and minorities receiving this degree. Over the last 20 years U.S. postsecondary institutions have also awarded the most science and engineering degrees. And a 1993 report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that the U.S. spends more per student on higher education each year than any other nation.

Outside the School

Based on his study of students at risk, Jack Frymier concluded, ". . . problems that most children face lie outside the school rather than inside, on the street rather than on the playground, and in the living room rather than in the classroom."[29] Five characteristics have been found to correlate with poor performance in school—race and ethnicity, poverty, family composition, mother's education, and language background.[30] To be educationally disadvantaged on several indicators heightens the probability of educational failure.

How many of America's children are disadvantaged? Estimates vary, but many are in the 40% range. According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy, of 1.7 million families started in 1990, 45% are at risk because the mother was in her teens, the parents were unmarried, or the mother had not completed high school.[31] Many of the factors that disadvantaged children face—poverty, family composition—are beyond the schools' realm of influence.

In the mid-1960s James Coleman contended that academic performance is determined almost exclusively by characteristics of a student's background.[32] Obviously, children spend far more time outside school than inside—less than 12% from first grade to their senior year. Knowing this, it is curious that schools alone are blamed when children fail. Is it possible that other influences are also at work? We know, for example, that the more television children watch, the lower their reading scores will be.[33] Using even a modest average of three hours viewing per day, children would spend 12.5% of their time each year in front of a television set—more time than they spend in school![34]

Concern about the potential negative effects of television, especially depictions of violence, on children's behavior has been expressed for many years. Taking note of the dramatic increase in violent behavior among even very young children, policy makers seem poised to take action. Attorney General Janet Reno, testifying recently before the Senate Commerce Committee, complained about the "worthless" promises

"Problems that most children face lie outside the school rather than inside, on the street rather than on the playground, and in the living room rather than in the classroom."

of the entertainment industry to reduce depictions of violence on television, in movies, and in video games and threatened to take legal steps to control it.[35]

Michael Kirst speculates that, at least in part, some weaknesses in America's education system are due to the "relative lack of support here for children, compared to other nations in the industrialized world."[36] This view is reinforced by a new United Nations Children's Fund study that indicates the percentage of children living in poverty in the U.S. is more than double that of other major industrialized nations.[37] Slightly more than 20% of U.S. children live in families with incomes below 40% of median disposable income compared with 10% for Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom and 5% for other major industrialized nations. The failure of tax policies and welfare programs to mitigate poverty in the U.S. is to blame, the report says.

Economic and political conditions in other countries, too, significantly affect U.S. schools. Nearly 30% of the nation's population growth in the 1980s (almost eight million people) was due to immigration, according to the Sandia researchers. And while total enrollment in U.S. public schools rose only 4.2% between 1986 and 1991, the number of students with little or no knowledge of English increased 50%.[38] A Rice University economist estimates the cost of educating immigrant students during the next decade at $668.5 billion.[39]

The impact of immigration on families is substantial, as parents struggle to preserve their own culture while their children are learning a new one. A Cambodian mother in the Bronx describes how immigrant parents may lose authority when they cannot speak English but their children can: "A lot of parents just stop communicating with their kid. The kid speaks English. They think, 'You know better than I.' They abandon their duty as parents."[40] In Seattle, a city with a growing immigrant population, gang-related crime is increasing at a faster rate in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities, possibly reflecting a similar abdication of parental involvement. Adding to the stress for refugee families, the period of federal assistance was cut from 36 to 8 months in 1992.

Rally Round the School

Former Education Secretary Terrel H. Bell, who appointed the National Commission on Excellence in Education, says that the intent of *A Nation at Risk* was to rally people around their schools, not to blame teachers and schools. "No school, no matter how effective, can fully compensate for failure in the home. . . . The cataclysmic change in the quality of students' lives outside of school and the steady erosion of parental support and community interest in education made it almost impossible for schools to succeed. In the face of these conditions, teachers were making heroic efforts. . . . It would be unfair to conclude that we have totally failed to make our schools more efficient and effective in the difficult decade between 1983 and 1993."[41]

The Sandia researchers warned that the social conditions now challenging educators are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future, noting that demographic changes are "real, persistent, and accelerating. They will drive change in education, and other social institutions as well, especially since we continue to accept the challenge to educate all of our youth."[42] These conditions place increasing demands on our schools and raise important questions about what the role of education in the U.S. should be. Is it "to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets," as the Commission on Excellence in Education

suggested? Should education be a great social service delivery system? A producer of workers for the twenty-first century? A provider of Hirsch's "core knowledge"? Whatever choices we make, one thing is certain: If schools are to meet these challenges, children and the schools they attend will need broader support from society at large. ❑

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